DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 026 409 TE 500 269

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The Graduate Record Examination: A Minority Statement and a Prediction.

Association of Departments of English, New York, N.Y.
Pub Date Jan 69
Note-3p.
Journal Cit-ADE Bulletin; n20 p50-52 Jan 1969
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.25
Descriptors-*Admission Criteria, College Admission, Competitive Selection, *English, Graduate Students, *Graduate Study, Higher Education, Predictive Ability (Testing), *Standardized Tests, Student Testing, *Test Reliability, Tests
Identifiers-Graduate Record Examinations, GRE

Arguments are set forth to encourage continued use of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) as supplementary information rather than as an exclusive criterion for selecting graduate candidates in English. The author predicts that the GRE will be increasingly used and will increasingly come to define and control undergraduate and graduate instruction in English. (CW)

ED026409

FROM: ADE BULLETIN Number 20 January 1969

THE GRADUATE RECORD EXAMINATION: A MINORITY STATEMENT AND A PREDICTION

By Randolph H. Hudson, Central State University

ADE members attending the December MLA Convention were invited to a session concerned primarily with the use of the Graduate Record Examination in screening applicants to graduate programs. The argument was that as more and more students apply to more and more graduate schools, screening procedures will by necessity be simplified, and the GRE will be increasingly widely used and trusted. The second half of the argument was designed to allay the misgivings of those of us who are uneasy about such a development. I, for one, left the Georgian Ballroom of New York's Americana Hotel convinced more by the first half of the pitch than the second. The sudden death of Professor Bradford Booth prevented the delivery of his paper, but it was distributed in written form. Professor Booth had prepared a convincing account of the obvious high purpose, intelligence, and goodwill that go into making up the Literature section of the GRE. His paper carries the expected disclaimer: "Now let me say at once . . . that I have never encountered any committee member or anybody at ETS who considered that the test offered to admissions officers anything but valuable supplementary information. It is obviously not a substitute for a course record extending over four years." In Professor Booth's own department, however, this disclaimer appears to have been disclaimed, for we later read, "I can report that at UCLA we do not accept for graduate admission in English any student who scores on the GRE lower than the 70th percentile, unless the other evidence of superior promise is overwhelming."

From this paper we learn that the test through multiple-choice questions covers Literary Analysis (55%) and Literary Background (45%), with sub-categories maintaining an appropriate balance between various periods of English and American literature. A question from the floor asked whether test results could show the breakdown of scores by Literary Analysis and Literary Background and by the other sub-categories, but the answer was that the small number of questions in individual categories makes the scores in these areas unreliable. The final score, then, is the summation of several components, each of which is, in itself, statistically unreliable. One might argue that just as every cell in the human body carries the full genetic register of the larger organism, so, too, can a single strong sentence offer valid evidence of the writer's mind in a way that no accumulation of multiple-choice answers can. The multiple-choice test assumes that the important question is what is the right answer; whereas the real question is why is one of the answers superior to the others?

Is the final score a valid indication of appropriate admissions criteria? One notices immediately that a student attempting to transfer into English from another field would be at a great disadvantage when competing against applicants who had been plugging along toward their English Ph.D.'s since their freshman years, and since superior work in, say, philosophy, is hardly "overwhelming" evidence of superior work in English, such applicants are presumably to be rejected by departments which follow Professor Booth's advice about maintaining a high cut-off point. One can argue, then, that as it is now written, scored, and employed, the test thus systematically eliminates those students who could bring to their graduate work the excitement of discovering a new field, and bring to the profession the findings of related areas of study.

Dr. Gustave Arlt spoke for the academic people who represent us to the ETS. He talked at some length about the problem of testing for "maturity"--suggesting that, as I understood his argument, the long period required by the average student in English (9.1 years) to complete his doctorate contrasted to the shorter time required by young scientists (5.4 years for chemists) shows that students entering the humanities are often less mature than their professionally oriented scientific colleagues. Students enter the

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humanities because of their desire to read widely and think widely; students entering scientific fields know what they want to do, what they want to be, and how to get there. Dr. Arlt is working toward the day when the GRE can discourage from graduate training those students in humanities with insufficient "maturity" to match the professional pace of scientists.

It is hardly just to blame students for those obvious academic and economic pressures that make completion of doctorates unnecessarily slow. Indeed, departments which have made efforts to tidy up their Ph.D. programs have generally found that, mature or not, students can complete their dissertations on time. But a more fundamental criticism can be made. If "immaturity" is to be attributed to those students who read for the pleasure or interest inherent in the experience at the expense of clearly defined professional purposes, then a test which excludes "immature" students from graduate programs excludes those very students who probably belong in it--students whose enthusiasms range widely, and from whose numbers will come those who produce significant syntheses of human expression and experience.

John Winterbottom, representing ETS, concluded the program. He convinced us that there is little financial profit in the GRE, and what money is left over is put back into research. He convinced us that academic people have considerable control over basic decisions relevant to the testing. Mr. Winterbottom left us with a prediction: related academic and economic pressures will force graduate admissions officers to rely more and more widely on the GRE.

Mr. Winterbottom is probably correct; indeed, one who accepts his assumptions may extend his argument. A graduate department that demands a GRE score of the 75th percentile is, by definition, more selective than one which demands a mere 60th percentile, and the more selective department will attract the larger number of professionally ambitious applicants and thus be able to maintain its standards--maintain them until another department demands a score above the 85th percentile and thus proves itself even more selective. And such standards will most certainly affect undergraduate instruction, which will become increasingly closely geared to eventual success in the GRE. I was surely not the only member of the audience who, while running my eye over the types of GRE questions listed in Professor Booth's paper, wondered how I could "tighten" my own program, thus to put my students in professionally advantageous positions. Nor was I the only member of the audience who jotted down the address (Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey) from which I was invited to obtain sample questions. Mr. Winterbottom disclaimed any desire to see programs adjust to the test, just as Alfred Nobel once assumed only peacetime uses of dynamite.

And now my own prediction, which evolves from the implications drawn from Mr. Winterbottom's talk. Yes, the GRE will come to be increasingly tightly used and the type of correct-incorrect responses which it demands will increasingly come to define and control undergraduate and graduate instruction in English. Large departments, as Mr. Winterbottom suggests, will use the test because of its simplicity; small departments (which don't need the test because they have the personnel to do a more thorough job of screening applicants) will use the GRE to keep up with the large departments. And at the same time, an opposite reaction will occur. Some chairmen, uneasy before the prospect of measuring abilities by standardized tests, given nationally without provision for a student to stress what he, himself, sees most attractive in himself, will develop programs that avoid the very type of control that the GRE encourages. They will accept students who are not already professionals in conventional English literature (students who, instead, may be playwrights, or sky-divers), and they will seek students who are "immature" in the sense that they read widely and talk enthusiastically about lots of ideas at once. They will attempt to deal honestly with the paradoxical problem of training students professionally and at the same time not superimposing such limits

on this professionalism that the students will find themselves cut off from that large understanding that underlies genuine contributions to human knowledge.

Just as some freshman composition programs work toward a standardized testing of success, some undergraduate programs will point toward the GRE. And some will not. One can hope that students who have been given the freedom to define their own areas of inquiry will by their own success demonstrate the desirability of maintaining programs irrelevant to that system of formal, standardized national testing that will increasingly control the profession.

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